Chapter 1

Scene Song: "Swallowtail Jig" ~ Hillary Klug

Friday morning in Pelmont arrived bright and shameless. The sky over Pelmont was a clear, glowing blue, not a single cloud in sight, and the air had already settled into a perfect eighty degrees. Sunlight streamed over the beach houses, turned the pale stone paths gold, and made the ocean in the distance glitter like cut glass. It was the kind of morning that usually had Remmick up by eight without fail—washed, dressed, coffee in hand, ready to take on the day before the rest of the world had properly opened its eyes. Today, however, Remmick was still in bed. And that alone was wrong enough to irritate him before he was even fully awake.

He stirred with a low groan, the sheets tangled around his legs, his body feeling like it had been beaten sometime in the night by an unseen mob. His head pounded. His throat burned. His skin felt too hot and too cold at once, a miserable contradiction that made him want to climb out of his own body and fling it into the sea. He cracked his eyes open and immediately regretted it. The morning light slipping through the curtains stabbed behind his eyes like a weapon.

"Jesus Christ," he rasped, squeezing his eyes shut again.

He lay there for another few seconds, breathing through the strange heaviness pressing down on his limbs, then forced himself upright inch by inch. The room tilted unpleasantly around him. Remmick sat on the edge of the bed, one hand pressed to his forehead, the other braced against the mattress, and tried to make sense of what in the hell was happening to him. The afterlife wasn't supposed to work like this. That had been one of the comforts of Pelmont—no rot, no decay, no old-world sickness gnawing through the body. Pain of memory, yes. Grief, yes. But not this. Not fever. Not aching bones. Not a throat that felt lined with razors. He swallowed and winced.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

For one deeply suspicious second, he wondered if he'd somehow done this to himself. Thought it up in his sleep. Manifested it. That was possible in Pelmont. People thought things into being all the time in Pelmont—food, rooms, objects, whole atmospheres. Jimmy had manifested enough nonsense by sheer force of ego alone to make the point clear. So if Remmick, in some unconscious corner of himself, had thought up being sick—

"Well, that's just perfect," he muttered, thick with congestion.

Because if he *had* done that, he had no idea how to unthink it. He sat there another moment, shoulders slumped, trying not to move his head too fast. Then, pressure built sharply in his nose. He barely had time to turn before he sneezed violently into the crook of his arm once, twice, three times in brutal succession, each one making his skull throb harder.

“Ah, damn it—”

Miserable, sweating, and already offended by existence, Remmick dragged himself to his feet and made his way downstairs, every step felt personal. By the time he reached the kitchen, one hand was pressed to the side of his head, and his mouth was set in a thin, furious line. Then he stopped. There, in the middle of his kitchen, like an infestation in designer sportswear, stood Jimmy. Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal himself was at the counter in a full tracksuit, tiara on his head, chains glinting at his throat, one hand already halfway inside a newly opened box of cereal. Remmick stared at him through the fog of his headache. Then, in a voice so rough with illness it sounded dragged over gravel, Remmick asked:

“What the hell are you doin’ in my house?”

Jimmy looked over with no guilt whatsoever.

“Sasha’s out of cereal,” Jimmy answered, as if this explained everything, “and so am I. There is absolutely no way I can watch the Teletummies without cereal, so you should consider this the one and only historic occasion in which I’ll be watchin’ the Teletummies over here.”

Jimmy held up the cereal box like a legal document.

“Honestly, you ought to feel honored.”

Remmick just stared at him, then the pressure came back fast and vicious. Remmick turned away from Jimmy just in time to double over into another sneezing fit, one hand catching the edge of the kitchen island while the other flew up over his nose and mouth. The sneezes came hard enough to hurt. By the end of it, his eyes were watering, his head was pounding even worse, and his whole body felt weak and irritated. That got Jimmy’s attention. The cereal box lowered slowly. Jimmy’s eyes narrowed.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Jimmy demanded.

Remmick leaned heavily over the island, both hands braced on the countertop now, head hanging for a second before he lifted it enough to glare weakly at Jimmy.

“I’m sick.”

Jimmy blinked.

“What do you mean, sick?”

"I mean *sick*," Remmick snapped, his voice wrecked by illness. "I woke up with the flu or some miserable version of it. My head’s poundin’, my throat feels shredded, my whole body hurts, I’m too hot, I’m too cold, and every time I move my eyes I feel like somebody’s drivin’ nails through my skull."

Jimmy went very still. Then, slowly, he began backing up. His expression shifted to one of pure, alarmed revulsion as if Remmick announced he was actively dissolving.

“…Okay,” Jimmy said cautiously. “Well. Look.”

Jimmy backed up another step.

“I’m not especially good at dealin’ with…” Jimmy waved one hand vaguely.

“*This*.”

Remmick frowned at him through his fever.

“Jimmy—”

“So,” Jimmy continued quickly, already reaching for the cereal box with one hand and the jug of milk with the other, “why don’t I just take this cereal and your milk and go watch the Teletummies over at Sasha’s, and Sasha, bein’ the motherin’ type and all, will obviously come over and look after you.”

Remmick shut his eyes tight and pressed his fingers to them, as if maybe he could crush the pain out of his skull.

"Wait," Remmick gritted out, "Jimmy, come back here with my cereal—"

But Jimmy was already moving—*fast*. In one smooth, appallingly selfish motion, he tucked the cereal box under one arm, grabbed the milk by the handle, and hurried toward the back door like a jewel thief escaping with stolen goods. He paused only long enough to turn around and look at Remmick.

“Don’t die,” Jimmy said, “not before Sasha gets here.”

Then Jimmy was gone, the back door shut behind him. Silence fell over the kitchen. Remmick stared blearily at the empty doorway for one long second. Then he let out a loud, exhausted exhale and slowly dropped his forehead onto the cool countertop of the island. His head throbbed. His throat burned. Jimmy had stolen his cereal, and somehow, against all reason, that felt like the final insult.

"This," Remmick muttered into the counter, his voice muffled with misery, "is a deeply shitty mornin’."

He stayed there, slumped over the island in feverish annoyance, too tired to move, too sick to properly curse, and already dreading whatever fresh hell Jimmy was no doubt carrying straight to Sasha’s house.

Scene Song: “Axel F” ~ Harold Faltermeyer

Jimmy arrived at Sasha’s house like a man fleeing biological warfare. He came through the front door with Remmick’s cereal tucked under one arm, the jug of milk clutched in his other hand, and the air of someone who had barely escaped a collapsing building. He kicked the

door shut behind him, breathing a touch harder than the situation probably required, and marched straight into the kitchen.

“Sasha!”

Sasha was already fully dressed for work in a flowery, summer sundress and sandals. She looked up from where she was slipping things into her shoulder bag on the counter, blinked, then looked at the cereal, then the milk, and then at Jimmy.

“You went out and bought groceries?” she asked.

“No, these came from Remmick’s house,” Jimmy responded, setting both items down on the counter like evidence in a criminal trial.

Sasha frowned with a brow raised.

"Okay—why are they—here?" she pressed.

Jimmy shook his head with a faint and brief half smile while pointing back toward the door with grave urgency.

“Because Remmick is over there dyin’ of some foul, feverish peasant plague,” he replied. “The man looked like death got bored and came back for a second try.”

Sasha’s expression changed immediately.

“What?”

Jimmy dragged a hand dramatically across his chest and leaned against the island.

“I went over there merely to borrow cereal in the spirit of brotherhood and survival,” he said, “and what do I find? Him hunched over the counter, lookin’ like a haunted dishrag, sneezin’ like his skull was about to come out through his fuckin’ face.”

Sasha frowned, concern replacing amusement fast.

“He’s sick?”

“Sick as fuck,” Jimmy said. “Head poundin’, throat hurtin’, body achin’, eyes all hollow. He looked like he couldn’t care for himself right now if Florence Nightingale herself rose from the dead, slapped an instruction manual in his hand, and lit a candle for the occasion.”

Sasha tried not to smile at the delivery, but worry won out.

“Oh *damn*.”

“Exactly,” Jimmy said, nodding sharply. “So you should go tend to him.”

Sasha made a helpless face and glanced toward the clock.

“Jimmy, I can’t.”

He stared at her with a brow raised.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“I have to get to the center. Today’s picture day.”

Jimmy frowned at her as if she had just announced a moral failure.

“Picture day?”

“Yeah, picture day.”

“Sasha, if you don’t go over there, Remmick’s gonna die alone in his kitchen with no fuckin’ cereal and a head full of influenza.”

"Please, stop the dramatics," Sasha replied with a half-smile. "You and I both know he’s not going to die."

Jimmy folded his arms.

“You didn’t see him. The man couldn’t look after himself in this condition if a kindly nun moved into the pantry and started ringin’ a little fuckin’ bell every time he needed soup.”

That made Sasha laugh despite herself.

“No, laugh if you want, but I’m serious,” Jimmy said. “He looked tragic.”

Her face softened again, and for a second she really did seem torn. Then she exhaled and shook her head.

“Yeah, but I still can’t,” she said. “I have to be there today. We’ve got the kids dressed up, the backdrop set, parents already expecting the photos—there’s no way I can miss picture day.”

Jimmy looked deeply annoyed that the children of Pelmont had chosen today to commemorate themselves. Then Sasha said, very carefully:

“But you could go tend to him for the day.”

Jimmy’s whole body recoiled. He looked at her as if she had just calmly suggested arson.

“Oh, no.”

Sasha folded her arms.

“Oh yeah, Jimmy—” she responded with an amused half smile.

“No,” he said, backing up half a step. “Absolutely not. I do not nurse the ill. I’m not one of those soft-handed people in old paintings carryin’ broth up damn staircases. Sick people start coughin’, sneezin’, sweatin’, lookin’ fragile and haunted—I don’t know what to do with any of that. It’s fuckin’ off-puttin’.”

Sasha laughed.

“I’m serious,” Jimmy said. “He’ll start askin’ for water in some weak little voice, and then what? What am I supposed to do with that? Comfort him? Pat his head? Tuck him in? No. I’m not built for that kind of emotional agriculture.”

Jimmy kept going, fully committed now.

“And besides, flu means contagion, pestilence, airborne fuckin’ treachery. I just escaped that house with my health and this cereal, and you want me to walk back into the fever den voluntarily? For what? Loyalty? Brotherhood? Absolutely not.”

Sasha shook her head, still smiling.

“Jimmy.”

He pointed a finger at himself.

“Sasha, *I* am a visitor, at best, a decorative support beam. I’m not a bedside maiden.”

That made her laugh harder. Then she stepped closer, and her tone softened.

“Remmick thinks of you like a brother, Jimmy.”

Jimmy’s expression shifted, just slightly. Sasha saw it and pressed on.

“And you feel the same way about him, whether you want to admit it dramatically or not.”

Jimmy sucked his teeth and looked away. Sasha continued, gentler now.

“He’s sick. He needs somebody there with him. And the flu is awful, Jimmy. It really does help to have someone look after you when you’ve got it. So get up and go back *over* there—on the *double*.”

Jimmy looked at her with an annoyed frown as she laughed.

“See, this is why you *really* need to stop watchin’ MASH,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile, resulting in Sasha laughing.

After sighing, Jimmy’s face tightened into the stubborn look he wore when he knew he was losing an argument but still intended to die theatrically on principle.

“My answer is still no,” he said.

Sasha sighed. Then, after one beat, she said:

“I’ll pay you twenty dollars.”

Jimmy’s eyes snapped to her at once, then narrowed.

“Fifty,” he responded.

Sasha blinked.

“Jimmy.”

“Fifty,” he repeated, “you want premium care under hazardous conditions.”

“Yeah, right, like you’re actually going to give him premium care.”

“That remains to be seen,” he said, briefly raising his brows.

Sasha folded her arms tighter and stared at him.

“Forty-five,” she said at last, “and I’ll throw in tickets to the new Six Flags in Pelmont.”

Jimmy’s face changed, not much, but just enough. Sasha saw she had him and kept going.

“With the new Teletubbies roller coaster.”

That did it. Jimmy’s whole expression lit with immediate, shameless delight. He looked at her, then at nothing, then back at her again, already imagining it.

“The new one?”

“Yup,” she said with her brows briefly raised and a scheming half smile.

“The Teletummies ride with the big hill and the sun baby entrance?” he asked with a full smile like an excited child.

“Yup.”

Jimmy fought very briefly to maintain dignity, but it was a losing battle. A smile broke across his face.

“You,” he said, pointing at her, “have yourself a deal.”

Sasha laughed. Before he could retreat into swagger again, she stepped in, wrapped her arms around him, and hugged him tight. Jimmy made a low, theatrical protest, but didn’t pull away. Sasha kissed him on the cheek, and he grimaced as if deeply inconvenienced by affection.

“Oh—all right, all right,” he muttered, “don’t turn this into a fuckin’ Hallmark special.”

Sasha laughed and stepped back.

“I’ll see you and Remmick later this evening after work.”

Jimmy tilted his head with false grandeur.

“If he survives my methods.”

Sasha laughed again, then softened.

“Thank you, baby bro, really, for helping him.”

Jimmy looked away, trying and failing to hide that the gratitude landed. Then he waved one hand like he was dismissing nonsense.

“Aye, well,” he said, “whatever, off you go. Go photograph the little menaces.”

Sasha laughed, grabbed her shoulder bag, and headed for the door. At the threshold, she turned back once more.

“Be nice to him.”

Jimmy looked offended.

“What? I’m *always* nice.”

Sasha just stared at him. He rolled his eyes.

“I’ll be—*appropriately* nice.”

“Yeah,” she replied with a brow raised and half smile, “that’s what I’m afraid of.”

Then she was gone, the front door shut behind her. Silence settled through the kitchen. Jimmy stood there alone for a second, staring at the cereal box and milk on the counter like they had personally led him into this mess. Then he let out a long sigh, squared his shoulders, and muttered to himself:

“Forty-five dollars, a roller coaster, and a fuckin’ plague house. Magnificent.”

He snatched up the cereal and milk again and turned toward the door with all the grim resignation of a man marching into battle for family, money, and Teletubbies.

Scene Song: “Neutron Dance” ~ The Pointer Sisters

By the time Jimmy got back to Remmick’s house, he was already annoyed again, not because he had changed his mind; he hadn’t. He was simply offended by the existence of the task before him, the way a prince might be offended by mud. One hand held the box of cereal tucked against his side, the other carried the jug of milk, and his face wore the expression of a man who fully intended to complain his way through an act of service. He let himself in without knocking.

“Remmick?” Jimmy called, shutting the door behind him. “Try not to be dead. I’ve been bribed into your continued survival.”

No answer. Jimmy frowned. He stepped farther into the house, setting the cereal and milk down on the kitchen island as he looked around, then he stopped. Remmick was lying flat on

his back on the kitchen floor, just there, on the floor. One arm flung out beside him, the other resting over his stomach, his hair a mess, his face pale and flushed all at once, looking like a feverish Irish ghost who had simply given up halfway through a task and collapsed where he stood. Jimmy stared, then his mouth twisted into a deeply offended frown.

"…What the fuck is this?"

Remmick opened one eye slowly and looked at him.

"The floor's cold," Remmick muttered hoarsely, "feels good since I'm burning up with a fever."

Jimmy just stood there for a second, blinking at him.

"You're lyin' in the kitchen like a murdered fuckin' Victorian woman."

Remmick shut his eyes again.

"The counter was too high."

Jimmy's expression deepened into disbelief.

"The counter," Jimmy repeated before shaking his head.

Remmick made a vague motion with one hand.

"My head hurts. I thought if I stayed on the floor for a minute, it might help."

"And then?"

"Then I stayed," Remmick responded.

Jimmy sucked his teeth so hard it nearly clicked, then he came around the island and stood over him, hands on his hips, staring down with a mixture of judgment and incredulity.

"Get up," Jimmy said.

Remmick opened both eyes now and frowned weakly.

"No."

"Oh no, no, no, we are not doin' this," Jimmy said. "You cannot just take to the floor like a sickly fuckin' farm animal because you've got influenza."

"I'm not takin' to the floor," Remmick muttered. "I'm coolin' down."

"You're decaying decoratively. Get up."

Remmick shut his eyes again. Jimmy stared at him one beat longer. Then, with a long-suffering sigh, he bent down and grabbed him under both arms.

“Come on.”

Remmick immediately resisted on instinct, not strongly, but enough to be aggravating.

“Jimmy—”

“No,” Jimmy cut in, “*up*. If I’m here, we are maintainin’ basic standards. I will not have you in the kitchen sprawled out like some fuckin’ fever-struck crypt keeper.”

Remmick groaned as Jimmy hauled him upward. Everything in Remmick hurt; his head pounded viciously, his throat burned, his skin felt wrong, and now Jimmy was physically moving him through space while talking too much, which made all of it worse.

“This is really unnecessary,” Remmick muttered.

“That’s bullshite,” Jimmy shot back. “You couldn’t fend for yourself with the flu if Mary Fuckin’ Poppins set up a medicine cart at your bedside, and rang a little bell every time it was time to swallow.”

Remmick gave him a sick glare. Jimmy kept hauling him upright.

“And why are you back?” Remmick asked, his voice rough and miserable as Jimmy slung one of his arms over his shoulder and began steering him out of the kitchen.

“Because,” Jimmy said, “Sasha is out snappin’ photos of the menaces at her center like they’re miniature criminals posin’ for mugshots, so apparently I’ve been appointed plague attendant for the day.”

Remmick squinted at him through the fever.

“*You*?”

“Yes, me,” Jimmy said irritably. “Don’t sound so wounded by it.”

“I didn’t ask for this,” Remmick said.

“*No* one asked for this,” Jimmy muttered, “and yet here we both are, trudgin’ through pestilence.”

They made it to the foot of the stairs. Remmick looked up at them, then looked at Jimmy.

“No,” Remmick said in a low voice.

Jimmy frowned with a brow raised.

“What do you mean, no?”

“I’m not climbing those,” Remmick responded.

Jimmy gave a short, disbelieving laugh.

“You live upstairs.”

“That was before.”

“Before *what*?” Jimmy asked with a now annoyed frown.

Remmick frowned at the staircase like it had personally betrayed him.

“Before I had the plague.”

Jimmy closed his eyes briefly, gathered his patience from wherever he hid such things, and then pointed one finger upward.

“You’re getting *back* into your *bed*.”

“I’ll sleep on the sofa.”

“No,” Jimmy said firmly.

“Why?”

“Because you are sweaty and diseased and tragic, and that belongs in a bedroom where there are blankets and doors.”

Remmick frowned. Jimmy stepped closer and lowered his voice with false gravity.

“And if you collapse halfway up these stairs, I swear to God I’ll fuckin’ drag you by the arms, and you will find that process both painful and humiliatin’.”

Remmick stared at him for a long second, then, because he was too sick to sustain the argument, he let out a miserable exhale.

“Fine.”

“That’s right,” Jimmy said, “climb, you haunted bastard.”

It took longer than either of them wanted. Remmick moved slowly, one hand gripping the railing, the other still hooked around Jimmy’s shoulder. By the time they got upstairs, his breathing was heavier, and his patience was gone entirely. Jimmy, to his own disgust, was beginning to feel a little sorry for him under all the annoyance, although he didn’t say it. Instead, he marched him into the bedroom and deposited him onto the edge of the bed.

“There,” Jimmy said.

Remmick sat hunched for a second, breathing through the ache in his body.

“I was fine downstairs.”

Jimmy barked a laugh.

“No, you weren’t. You were on the kitchen floor trying to refrigerate yourself like fuckin’ leftovers.”

That got no response except a weak glare. Jimmy pulled the blankets back with excessive force and pointed.

“In,” Jimmy commanded firmly.

Remmick looked up at him with the dull fury of a sick man being parented.

“You’re enjoyin’ this too much,” Remmick said weakly.

“I am not enjoyin’ *any* part of this,” Jimmy said, “but if I’m going to collect my money and my Teletummies roller coaster tickets, then you’re at least going to be ill in a proper location.”

Remmick muttered something foul under his breath but pulled himself farther onto the bed and let Jimmy yank the covers over him. Jimmy stepped back and looked him over critically. Remmick looked terrible. His eyes were heavy and glassy, his face flushed with fever, his mouth set in a hard line like he was trying not to let just how awful he felt show too much. And because he was Remmick, he wore misery like it was somehow a private insult. Jimmy folded his arms.

“All right. What have you had today?” Jimmy asked.

Remmick blinked at him.

“What?”

“Food,” Jimmy responded, “water, medicine, any of it.”

“I had half a glass of water,” Remmick responded with a weak frown.

“When?”

Remmick thought about it for a second.

“…Maybe before I ended up on the floor.”

Jimmy stared at him in horror.

“Oh, you are fuckin’ pathetic sick.”

“Get out, Jimmy.”

“No.” Jimmy pointed at him. “You hush. I’m assessin’ the damage.”

Remmick dragged one hand over his face.

“I’m too sick for this with you.”

“Aye,” Jimmy agreed immediately, “but in your defense, you do look too awful to properly resist.”

That earned Jimmy a tired, venomous look from Remmick. Jimmy went on, pacing a little now as he thought.

“Right,” Jimmy said, “you need water, probably medicine, something cold for your head, maybe soup.”

Remmick made a sour face.

“Ugh, no, no soup.”

Jimmy wheeled around.

“You don’t get to make culinary declarations from a fever nest.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what *is* the point?” Remmick responded.

“The *point*,” Jimmy said, his hands spread, “is that you’re in no fit state to direct your own fuckin’ recovery. You’ve demonstrated that. You sought relief by collapsin’ in the kitchen like a fallen lord. Your judgment is compromised.”

Remmick stared at the ceiling.

“This is why I didn’t want anybody here.”

Jimmy faintly frowned with a half smile.

“And yet, had no one come back, I’d have found you later spooning the tile.”

Remmick shut his eyes. His head hurt too badly for this. Jimmy noticed the way Remmick’s face tightened and, for all his chatter, his own tone softened a notch.

“How bad is the headache?”

Remmick answered without opening his eyes.

“Bad.”

Jimmy hesitated, then, more carefully asked:

“And the body aches?”

“Worse.”

“The throat?” Jimmy asked.

Remmick swallowed and winced.

“Feels like glass.”

Jimmy looked at him for a second. Under all the sarcasm and resistance, Remmick was genuinely sick, not malingering, not sulking, but *really* sick. Jimmy sighed and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck.

“Right,” Jimmy said. “Fine. Stay there. Don’t move. Don’t decide the bed’s too warm and go throw yourself into a flower bed or anything equally idiotic.”

Remmick opened one eye.

“Where are you going?”

Jimmy turned toward the door.

“To forage for remedies, obviously.”

“In my house?”

“Yes, in your house,” Jimmy said, frowning as if Remmick said something offensive. “Since I don’t imagine the influenza fairy left a fuckin’ basket by the stairs.”

Remmick closed his eyes again. He was too tired to keep up. Jimmy reached the doorway, then paused and looked back.

“Do you have medicine?”

Remmick took too long to answer. Jimmy narrowed his eyes.

“Remmick.”

“…Maybe in the bathroom.”

Jimmy’s jaw dropped.

“*Maybe*?”

“I don’t know where everything is right now.”

Jimmy raised a brow and briefly, faintly smiled.

“You don’t know where the medicine is in your own house?”

Remmick’s voice came muffled now from the pillow as he turned his face slightly into it.

“I’m sick, Jimmy.”

Jimmy stared at him for one long second, then lifted one hand in weary surrender.

“Fine,” Jimmy said, “all right. You just lie there in your plague chamber and deteriorate with dignity. I’ll sort it all out.”

“Forty-five dollars and roller coaster tickets to search and rescue in a fuckin’ luxury beach house, terrific,” Jimmy muttered to himself all the way down the hall.

Back in the bedroom, Remmick lay there under the blankets, aching, feverish, and deeply resentful of both his illness and Jimmy’s presence in his house. But as Jimmy’s complaining voice drifted faintly from elsewhere in the house while he rummaged for medicine, water, and whatever else counted as care, something in the house felt less empty, less cold. Remmick shut his eyes. He still felt awful, and he still wanted quiet—but he still would rather die than say any of that aloud. However, when Jimmy’s voice floated up from downstairs a minute later—

“Why do you have no clearly marked fuckin’ medicine cabinet, you impossible bastard?”—

a weak, miserable half-smile tugged at the corner of Remmick’s mouth before sleep started dragging at him again.

Chapter 2

Scene Song: "Burning Pipers Hut" ~ Beltaine

Jimmy reached his breaking point approximately forty minutes later. That was, frankly, forty minutes longer than anyone should have expected. He had managed—through grumbling, hostile determination, and several threats made to no one in particular—to find cough syrup in the bathroom cabinet, pain medicine in the kitchen, a clean glass, a washcloth, and a can of chicken noodle soup in the pantry that looked only mildly offensive. He had even heated the soup himself, glaring at the microwave the entire time as though domestic labor were a personal insult. He balanced the tray with all the solemn resentment of a man carrying tribute to a plague victim and started upstairs. Halfway up, he heard it, that unmistakable, awful sound. Jimmy stopped dead on the staircase, and his whole face changed; then he looked upward in complete disgust.

"Oh, *for fuck's sake*," Jimmy said with a roll of his eyes.

Jimmy took the remaining stairs faster, tray rattling in his hands, and got to the bedroom just in time to find Remmick leaning half off the bed, one forearm braced on the mattress, breathing hard, looking pale and sweaty and absolutely miserable. Jimmy stood in the doorway holding the tray and stared at him like the scene before him had personally insulted his bloodline.

"…Did you just fuckin' *vomit*?"

Remmick, who looked like he wanted to die and be left alone about it, shut his eyes briefly.

"Yeah."

Jimmy's mouth fell open.

"You couldn't have done that *after* I came up here with this tray and then left your room?"

Remmick turned his head and glared at him weakly.

"I didn't exactly schedule it."

Jimmy set the tray down on the dresser with a sharp clatter and threw one hand into the air.

"*This* is what I'm talkin' about. This is *exactly* what I meant. Sickness is chaos. There's no order, no fuckin' planning, no standards."

Remmick dragged himself back more fully onto the bed with visible effort.

"Jimmy."

“What?”

“Shut up.”

Jimmy looked deeply wounded by the request, but only for a second. Then he grabbed the washcloth, stalked into the bathroom, wet it under cold water, wrung it out badly, and came back into the room like a nurse in a melodrama who resented the entire profession.

“Here,” Jimmy said, dropping it none too gently onto Remmick’s forehead.

Remmick hissed.

“That’s freezing.”

“That’s the point.”

Jimmy returned to the tray and lifted the spoon.

“All right. Sit up. I brought you soup.”

“I don’t want soup.”

“You don’t get to *not* want things right now.”

Remmick made a low, disgusted sound in his throat but pushed himself up against the headboard anyway, moving with the defeated irritation of a man too sick to defend his own preferences properly. Jimmy shoved the tray across his lap.

“There. Soup. Water. Cough syrup. Pain pills. Civilization.”

Remmick looked down at the tray, then at the bottle of cough syrup, then back at Jimmy with a sour frown.

“No.”

Jimmy blinked.

“*No*?”

“I’m not taking that.”

Jimmy stared at him.

“The cough syrup?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Remmick looked personally offended.

“Because it tastes horrible.”

Jimmy just looked at him for a second, then laughed once in disbelief.

“You’re refusin’ medicine on flavor?”

Remmick frowned more, his voice rough and feverish and full of deeply sincere irritation.

“It tastes like somebody boiled a rotten boot in licorice and then poured grief on top.”

Jimmy had to pause and display a sour frown. That was, unfortunately, vivid. Remmick glared at the bottle like it had ruined his childhood.

“I’m not drinking it.”

Jimmy folded his arms.

“You have the flu.”

“I *know* what I have,” Remmick replied with irritation.

“You’re coughin’ like an elderly chimney.”

“I said *no*.”

Jimmy uncapped the bottle anyway and poured a dose into the little medicine cup.

“Oh, no, no, no. You don’t get veto power. Open your mouth.”

Remmick stared at him with dull horror.

“Jimmy.”

“*Drink* it.”

“*No*,” Remmick said firmly.

Jimmy thrust the little cup closer.

“Remmick.”

“*No*,” Remmick said, swiftly turning his head away like some defiant child.

Jimmy narrowed his eyes.

“Goddamn it, Remmick, don’t fuckin’ make me airplane this into you.”

That was apparently the wrong thing to say, because Remmick, in one abrupt, feverish act of rebellion, slapped the medicine cup sideways—sending the cough syrup tipping directly into the bowl of chicken noodle soup. There was a beat of absolute silence. Both men stared at the bowl. The cough syrup spread slowly across the broth in a sickly ribbon. Jimmy looked at

Remmick. Remmick, without one ounce of apology, turned over in bed, pulled the blanket up, and presented Jimmy with his back.

“I’m not eating that now either,” Remmick muttered into the pillow.

Jimmy stood frozen, then his mouth opened, then shut again, then opened wider.

“*You*,” Jimmy said, his voice filled with outrage, “are a *hateful* invalid.”

Remmick gave no response beyond a small, stubborn shift farther away from him. Jimmy looked at the ruined soup, at the tipped medicine cup, and then at the back of Remmick’s head. And then, very slowly, he set the tray down on the dresser before he did something regrettable.

“All right,” Jimmy said quietly. “*Fine*.”

That tone should have worried anyone who knew Jimmy. Remmick, mercifully, was too sick to pay attention. Jimmy pulled his phone from his pocket and marched out of the room. He went downstairs, paced once through the kitchen, then stabbed at the screen and put the call on speaker. Smoke answered first.

“What?”

Jimmy didn’t even bother with hello.

“I need reinforcements.”

There was a pause. Then Smoke said:

“*What*?”

Jimmy stopped pacing and pointed accusingly at the air as though all three men were already present and failing him.

“Your little Irish fuckin’ brother-in-spirit is upstairs sick with the flu and conductin’ himself like a fevered war criminal. He vomited, rejected the cough syrup on artistic grounds, poisoned his own fuckin’ *soup* out of spite, and has now turned his back on me like some consumptive duchess in a nineteenth-century novel. I need support.”

For two full seconds, Smoke said nothing, then, very faintly, Jimmy heard Stack laughing in the background. Jimmy scowled at the phone.

“Don’t you fuckin’ start,” Jimmy said.

That only made Stack laugh harder.

“I would’ve thought you would’ve had something like that handled,” Smoke said, dry as dust.

Jimmy’s eyes widened.

“Oh, fuck you.”

That made Sammie’s voice pop up somewhere in the background too.

“Wait, what happened?” Sammie asked.

Jimmy spun toward the kitchen island like he was addressing a room full of idiots.

“What happened is I was lured into a domestic medical crisis under false pretenses! I was told I’d be tending to a sick man. I *wasn’t* told, however, that he’d become fuckin’ difficult, mutinous, and bodily unpredictable.”

Stack was laughing openly now. Jimmy could hear him clear as day.

“I can believe it,” Stack said. “You not built for something like that.”

“I’m built for many things,” Jimmy retorted with a brief and faint frown.

“Not nursing,” Smoke said.

Jimmy ignored him.

“I need one or more of you to get over here immediately,” Jimmy said.

Sammie, trying to be helpful, asked:

“What you need us to bring?”

Jimmy stopped, thought about it, then spread one hand in baffled frustration.

“I don’t know. Dignity? A stronger immune system? Somethin’ for a fuckin’ fever. Somethin’ that tastes less like boiled shoe leather. Maybe ginger ale—do sick people even drink ginger ale? They do, don’t they? Bring that.”

Stack was still laughing. Smoke sounded like he was trying not to.

“A’ight, we’ll be over,” Sammie said.

Jimmy pointed at the phone like, finally, finally, someone in the world had chosen sense.

“*Yes*! Good!” Jimmy exclaimed, with a faint half-smile, “excellent, fuckin’ hurry.”

Smoke’s voice came back calm and low.

“You all right though?”

Jimmy drew himself up immediately.

“I’m magnificent, thanks for asking. Remmick is the problem.”

From upstairs, right on cue, there came the rough, miserable sound of Remmick coughing hard enough to echo faintly down the stairwell. The whole kitchen went quiet for half a beat. Jimmy closed his eyes, then looked toward the ceiling.

"…Bring more than one ginger ale," Jimmy said.

Scene Song: "Rhinestone Eyes" ~ Gorillaz

By early evening, the house had settled into a strained, uneasy sort of rhythm. Smoke had taken over the practical side of things. Sammie had remained useful from a polite distance. Stack had contributed almost nothing except commentary and amusement. Jimmy, against all nature, had stayed in motion—complaining, pacing, throwing out hostile observations, and somehow still tending to Remmick more than anybody else. For a while, it seemed to be working. Remmick had taken the medicine. He'd eaten enough. He'd stopped fighting every small instruction with the fury of an insulted monarch. The coughing was still there, though—ragged, repetitive, draining. It kept clawing out of him in ugly bursts that left him breathless and glassy-eyed.

And eventually, somewhere between Jimmy stomping downstairs for more water and Smoke taking a call near the front window, Remmick made a very bad decision. When Jimmy came back upstairs, the first thing he noticed was that Remmick was sitting up a little too straight. The second thing he noticed was the cough syrup bottle, or rather, what was left of it. Jimmy stopped in the doorway and stared, then he slowly lowered the glass of water in his hand.

"…Why," Jimmy said, voice already darkening, "is that bottle nearly empty?"

Remmick looked over at him. There was a suspicious brightness in his eyes, and then, slowly, absurdly, he smiled, not a normal smile, a loose, feverish, goofy sort of smile.

"Oh," Jimmy said.

Remmick let out a little laugh, not a bark. Not his usual dry light laugh, a *real* laugh. Jimmy's face twisted into horrified disbelief.

"Oh, *no*!"

Downstairs, Stack's voice floated up faintly.

"What happened?!" Stack yelled.

Jimmy didn't take his eyes off Remmick.

"I think the invalid has become chemically unserious."

That brought all three of them upstairs fast. Smoke got there first, took one look at the bottle on the nightstand, then at Remmick's face, and his jaw tightened at once.

"How much you take?" Smoke asked.

Remmick looked at him and laughed again, softer this time, like the question itself was funny. Smoke's eyes narrowed.

"Remmick."

Remmick made a lazy little motion with one hand toward the bottle.

"Just…enough."

Stack saw the level in the bottle and let out a disbelieving breath.

"Man," Stack said with a faint half-smile and a shake of his head.

Sammie winced.

"Oh, no," Sammie said.

Smoke stepped closer to the bed and picked up the bottle, then his face hardened.

"You took half the damn thing?" Smoke asked in an upset voice.

Remmick, flushed and fever-soft and very obviously no longer operating under full dignity, nodded once and then said, with a little helpless laugh:

"I did it because the coughing wouldn't stop," Remmick said with a half smile.

Stack had to turn his head because he was already starting to laugh. Sammie was trying not to laugh too, but his mouth kept twitching. Jimmy, meanwhile, looked deeply betrayed by the entire scene.

"You took half a fuckin' bottle of cough syrup because you were *annoyed*?"

Remmick looked at him and, in the dreamy sincerity of the slightly medicated, said:

"I was trying to solve a problem."

Jimmy threw both hands into the air.

"That is not solving a fuckin' problem, that is poisoning yourself with cherry fuckin' treason!"

Smoke pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaled, and shook his head.

"All right," Smoke said. "Enough. He ain't dying, he just overdid it."

"He's very clearly drunk on medicine," Jimmy said with an upset frown.

“Yeah,” Stack said, grinning now, “he is.”

Remmick looked over at Stack and laughed again, then immediately coughed twice and looked offended that his body had interrupted his fun. Sammie shook his head.

“Damn, I ain’t never seen nobody get tipsy off cough syrup this fast,” Sammie said with an amused smile.

Jimmy pointed at the bed.

“He has no fuckin’ discipline.”

Smoke ignored the commentary and focused on Remmick.

“You done taking it?” Smoke asked.

Remmick blinked at him with exaggerated innocence.

“Probably,” Remmick responded with a faint half smile.

Smoke stared.

“Probably,” Smoke repeated with a shake of his head.

“Yeah,” Remmick said, his smile smaller now.

Smoke handed the bottle to Sammie, who took it like it might still do further damage from a distance. Then Smoke glared seriously at Remmick.

“You’re sleeping this off,” Smoke said.

“Nooo, I’m not sleepy,” Remmick responded with almost a humorous but childish frown.

“You *are now*,” Smoke said sternly.

That part, unexpectedly, worked. The syrup had made Remmick loose and goofy, but it also made him feel heavy. His eyelids were already lower than they’d been two minutes before. Jimmy, still standing there in judgment, folded his arms.

“This is what comes of independence,” Jimmy said. “This is what happens when people reject proper supervision.”

“Please, like you’re proper supervision,” Stack said immediately with a half smile while looking at Jimmy.

Jimmy snapped his head toward him and frowned as if Stack’s comment offended him, and it did.

“Hey, besides Smoke, I’m the only one here with fuckin’ commitment.”

“You the one who had to call backup,” Stack shot back, still smiling.

Smoke cut through it.

“All right, enough, Moe and Curly,” Smoke said to Jimmy and Stack.

Then Smoke looked at Remmick and jerked his chin toward the pillow.

“Lie down.”

This time, Remmick did it with only a vague mumble of protest. He rolled onto his side, then half onto the pillow with the vague, uncoordinated movements of a man whose sense had been medically diluted. Sammie set the bottle farther out of reach on top of the dresser. Jimmy pulled the blanket up with more force than was necessary.

“There,” Jimmy said. “Now if you ingest anything else without adult supervision, I’ll have you fuckin’ tied to the headboard.”

Remmick, already halfway under, let out one sleepy laugh, then, with his eyes closed, murmured:

“You’re so mean, Jimmy.”

That made Stack laugh loud enough to have to step back from the bed, and even Sammie broke and laughed outright. Jimmy recoiled.

“Hey, don’t start that soft, drunken nonsense shite with me,” Jimmy snapped with an upset frown.

Smoke, who had no interest in any of this becoming more ridiculous than it already was, checked Remmick’s breathing once, saw that the man was fine, and stepped back.

“Let him sleep,” Smoke said

And so they did, and eventually the house quieted again.

Later, after the syrup had worn itself into sleep and the light outside had deepened toward evening, the four of them were downstairs in the living room and kitchen area, lingering in the low, strange fellowship of men who had all somehow become part of the same ridiculous crisis. Sammie was leaning against the counter with a ginger ale. Stack had claimed a chair and looked entirely too comfortable. Smoke stood near the island with his arms folded, listening while Jimmy, still animated by grievance, revisited every fresh injustice of the day.

“I’m tellin’ you,” Jimmy was saying, “the man has the fuckin’ survival instincts of a decorative lamp when he’s sick.”

“Yeah, but you still took care of him,” Sammie said, smiling.

Jimmy shot him a look.

“I was financially coerced.”

“Mm-hm,” Stack said with a smile.

Before Jimmy could answer, a voice tore down from upstairs.

“JIMMY!”

All four of them went still, then came a rougher, hoarser, but equally loud follow-up:

“SMOKE! SOMEBODY!”

Jimmy frowned at the ceiling.

“Oh, what *now?*”

They all trooped upstairs together again, like a deeply unwilling emergency response team, and found Remmick propped up in bed looking sweaty, miserable, and annoyed enough to have fully returned to himself.

“What?” Smoke asked.

Remmick frowned at them all.

“My chest hurts.”

Jimmy briefly put a hand to his forehead and shook his head.

“Brilliant,” Jimmy said in a low tone.

Remmick ignored him and looked between the four of them with a kind of fever-weary dignity that was ruined by how sick he sounded.

“Can one of you rub that Vicks stuff on my chest?”

There was one second of silence, then Stack said:

“Oh *hell* no.”

Sammie recoiled instantly.

“Yeah, nah, I’m not doing that shit,” Sammie said with a smile and a shake of his head, resulting in Stack laughing.

Smoke’s face hardened in immediate refusal.

“There’s no way in hell I’m rubbin’ no damn Vicks on another man’s chest.”

Remmick looked hurt by the speed of their rejection. Jimmy rolled his eyes so hard it was almost a theatrical injury.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

Smoke, without even glancing at him, reached for the Vicks jar on the nightstand and tossed it toward Jimmy. Jimmy caught it against his chest. Then Smoke got up from the edge of the bed in one smooth movement that very clearly said, "You *do it."* Jimmy looked at the jar in his hands with grim offense, then at Remmick, then at the others.

“This,” Jimmy announced, “is the least fuckin’ dignified thing I’ve ever been made to do, and I once wore a crucifix in a war zone.”

Stack was already smiling. Sammie had both lips pressed together, trying not to laugh. Smoke just folded his arms. Jimmy sighed with all the long-suffering weariness of a saint under persecution, sat down on the edge of the bed, unscrewed the jar, and scooped out a large amount with his fingers. Remmick looked down at it, then up at Jimmy.

“You don’t have to use that much,” Remmick said.

Jimmy ignored him.

“Open your shirt,” Jimmy said with an irritated frown.

Remmick stared for a second, then reluctantly tugged the collar of his sleep shirt down enough to expose part of his chest. Jimmy slapped the Vicks on with the grace of a bricklayer. Remmick flinched immediately.

“Ow!” Remmick yelled.

Jimmy kept rubbing, not gently, not softly, but with the same aggressive energy he brought to everything in life, as though even medicinal ointment should fear him. Remmick sucked in a breath and jerked a little.

“Ow, Jimmy!” Remmick exclaimed. “You’re too rough, my chest already hurts!”

That did it. Stack burst out laughing. Sammie bent over, laughing. Jimmy, still rubbing the VapoRub in with criminal force, frowned down at Remmick.

“Oh, suck it up already. I’m not polishing fuckin’ silver,” Jimmy snapped, “I’m trying to save your lungs.”

Remmick looked half-offended, half-pained. Smoke shook his head once, slightly disgusted but faintly amused at Jimmy’s aggressiveness with Remmick, despite himself. Jimmy finally screwed the lid on the jar.

“There. Done,” Jimmy said. “Breathe in the medicinal witch grease and be fuckin’ grateful.”

Remmick muttered something foul under his breath and pulled the shirt back into place. Jimmy handed the Vicks jar back to Smoke without looking. Smoke caught it and set it down on the dresser like it was evidence. Stack was still laughing when the four of them filed back out of the room.

Scene Song: "Braveheart Theme - Celtic multi-instrumental"

A while later, after Remmick had finally gone quiet again, the four of them gathered in the kitchen. The house had dimmed into the evening. Outside, Pelmont still glowed warm and clear, but inside everything had softened—the lights lower, the air calmer, the fever-crisis settling into a manageable rhythm. Sammie had found crackers. Stack had found a bottle of soda. Smoke leaned against the counter, and for a few minutes their talk drifted onto the kind of subject men slid into when they were waiting around without admitting they were waiting: amusement parks, clubs, bad rides, and who among them would or wouldn't throw up on a roller coaster.

"I'm just sayin'," Sammie was saying, "some of them new rides look like they were designed by people who hate the neck."

Stack laughed.

"That's because they were."

Jimmy, who had somehow looped the conversation back around to his pending Six Flags reward, lifted one shoulder.

"If the Teletummies coaster kills me, at least I'll die in style."

Smoke looked at him with a faint, brief frown.

"Ain't you dead already?"

Jimmy pointed at him at once.

"Don't be technical."

Sammie laughed. Stack took a drink and said:

"You the kind of man who'd get off a roller coaster, mad it wasn't more violent."

"That is because I have standards," Jimmy replied.

Smoke shook his head once. Then Jimmy glanced toward the ceiling. He frowned. Then, with far less noise than he usually attached to concern, he muttered:

"I better go check and make sure the sick bastard ain't aspirated on his own blankets or somethin'."

Stack's mouth twitched. Smoke noticed but said nothing. Jimmy left the kitchen and went upstairs. This time, he didn't storm; he didn't announce himself. He pushed the bedroom door open just enough to look in. Remmick was peacefully asleep on his side, one arm tucked

under the pillow, the blankets twisted halfway off him again. The fever-flush had eased some. His breathing was deeper now, steadier, less ragged than it had been all day. Jimmy stepped into the room quietly.

For a second, he just stood there, looking at him. Then, with a small exhale through his nose, Jimmy crossed to the bed and reached down. He caught the half-fallen blankets and pulled them gently back up over Remmick's shoulder and side, tucking them in with an awkward care that would have embarrassed him to be seen. After that, he rested the back of his fingers against Remmick's forehead and held them there for a few seconds. When he pulled his hand away, a faint, brief smile touched his mouth. The fever was gone.

"Well," Jimmy murmured softly, almost to himself. "There you are."

He sighed lightly.

"I probably would've done all this anyway, even without Sasha's bribe."

Then Jimmy turned and left the room. What Jimmy didn't know was that Remmick had not been fully asleep, not quite. He had been drifting in that half-place between exhaustion and waking, too tired to move, too comfortable to speak, and fully aware—through closed eyes and quiet breath—of Jimmy pulling the blanket back over him, of the cool touch at his forehead, of that brief, unguarded brotherly kindness Jimmy would sooner set himself on fire than admit to in daylight. Remmick didn't open his eyes. He didn't call after him. He only lay there in the quiet after Jimmy left until sleep took him properly again.